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Hitchcock et al.

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(54) **METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR DECOUPLING
A CAPILLARY COLUMN FROM A GAS
CHROMATOGRAPHY-MASS
SPECTROMETRY (GC-MS) SYSTEM**

(71) Applicant: **Thermo Finnigan LLC**, San Jose, CA
(US)

(72) Inventors: **James M. Hitchcock**, Pflugerville, TX
(US); **George B. Guckenberger**,
Austin, TX (US)

(73) Assignee: **Thermo Finnigan LLC**, San Jose, CA
(US)

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H01J 49/04 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B23P 6/00** (2013.01); **G01N 30/7206**
(2013.01); **H01J 49/0422** (2013.01); **Y10T**
29/4973 (2015.01); **Y10T 29/49815** (2015.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC B23P 6/00; H01J 9/0422; G01N 30/7206;
Y10T 29/4973; Y10T 29/49815
See application file for complete search history.

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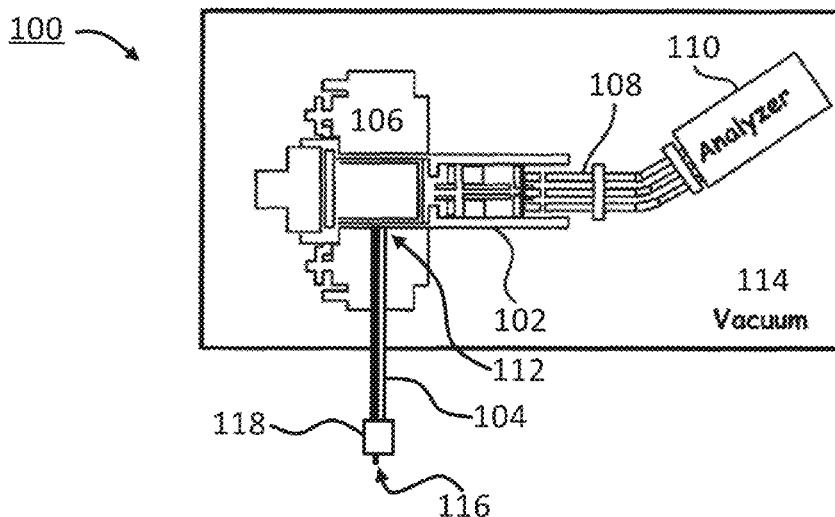
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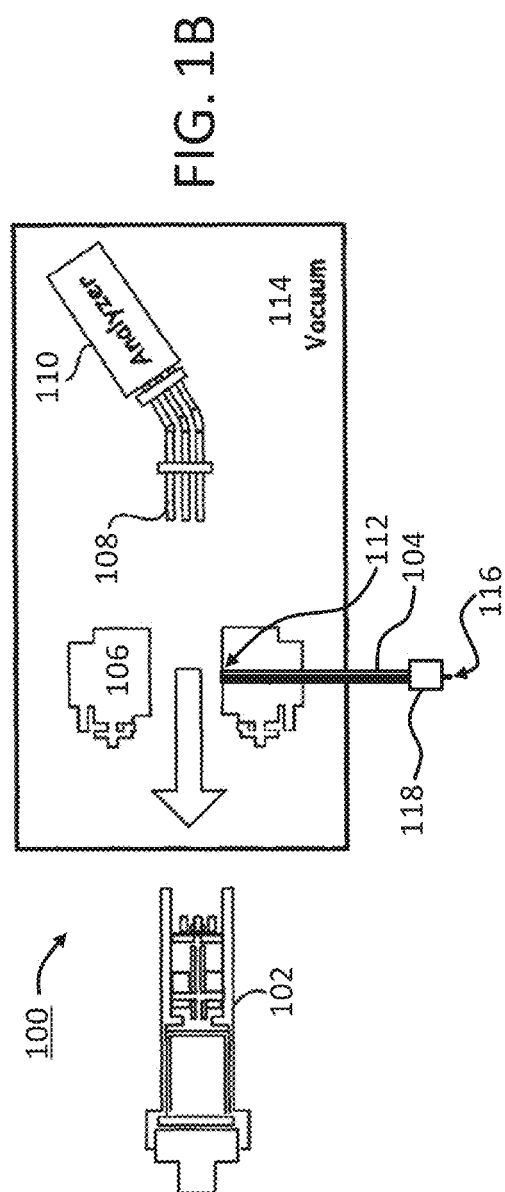
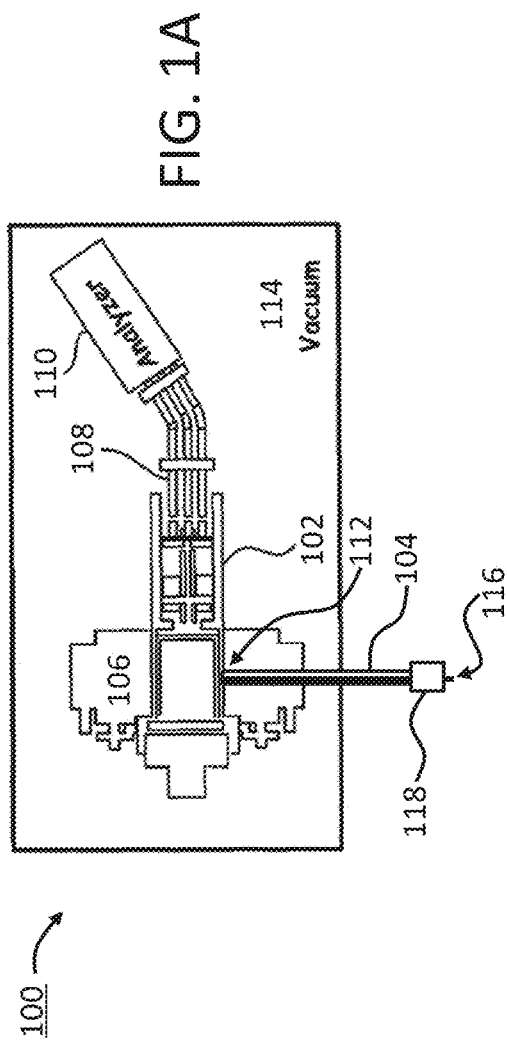
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Charles B. Katz; David
A. Schell

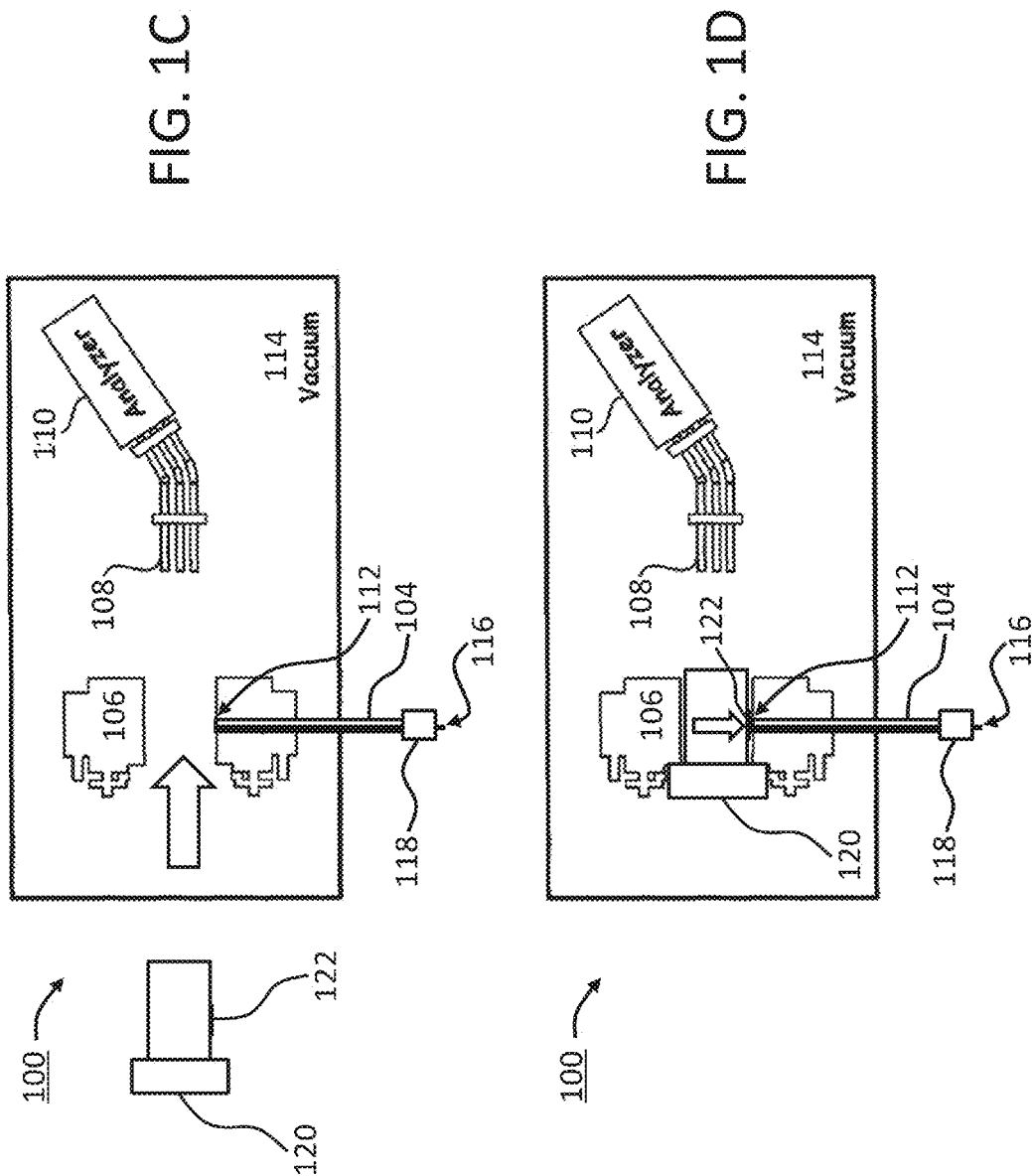
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A column-sealing tool is provided for use during decoupling of a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system. The column-sealing tool includes an engagement structure for removably securing the column-sealing tool within a high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system, at a location between a high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system. Additionally, the column-sealing tool includes a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position. During use the sealing element forms a secondary vacuum seal with the first end of the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system and when the sealing element is in the sealing position.

10 Claims, 8 Drawing Sheets







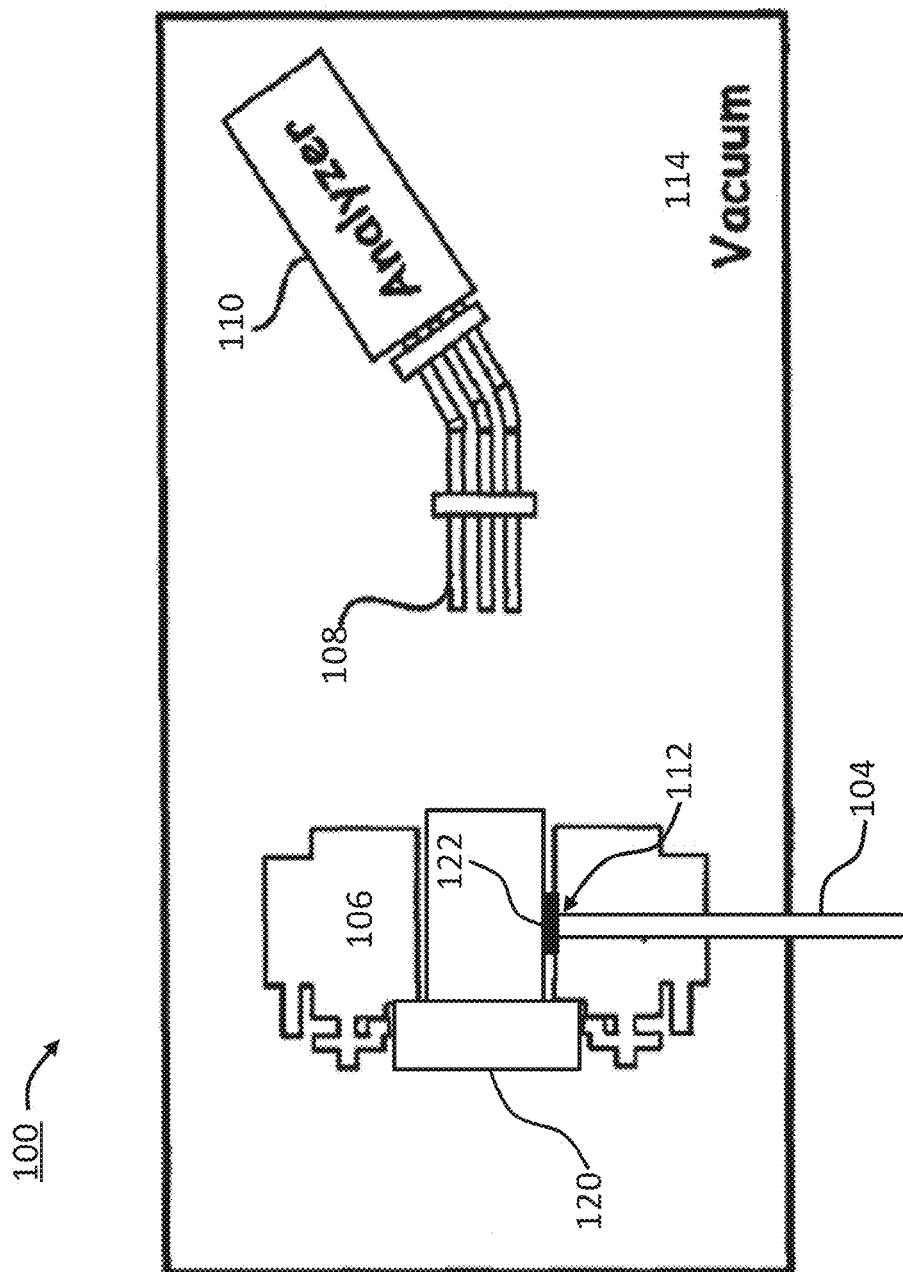


FIG. 1E

200

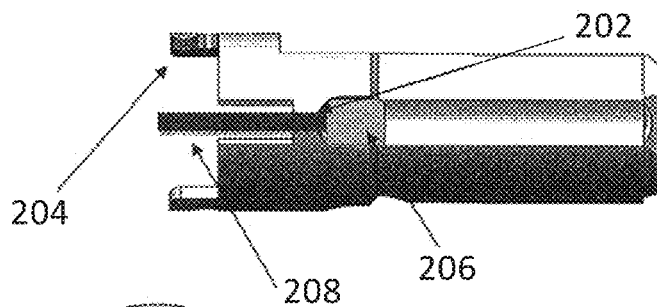


FIG. 2A

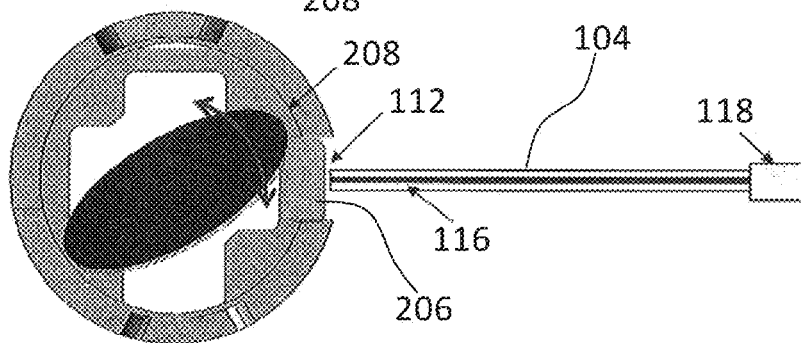


FIG. 2B

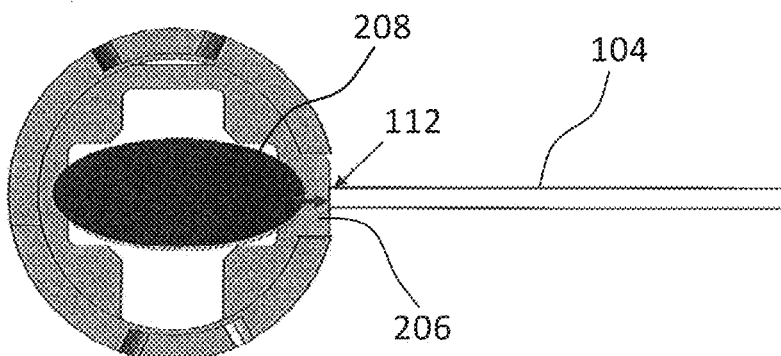


FIG. 2C

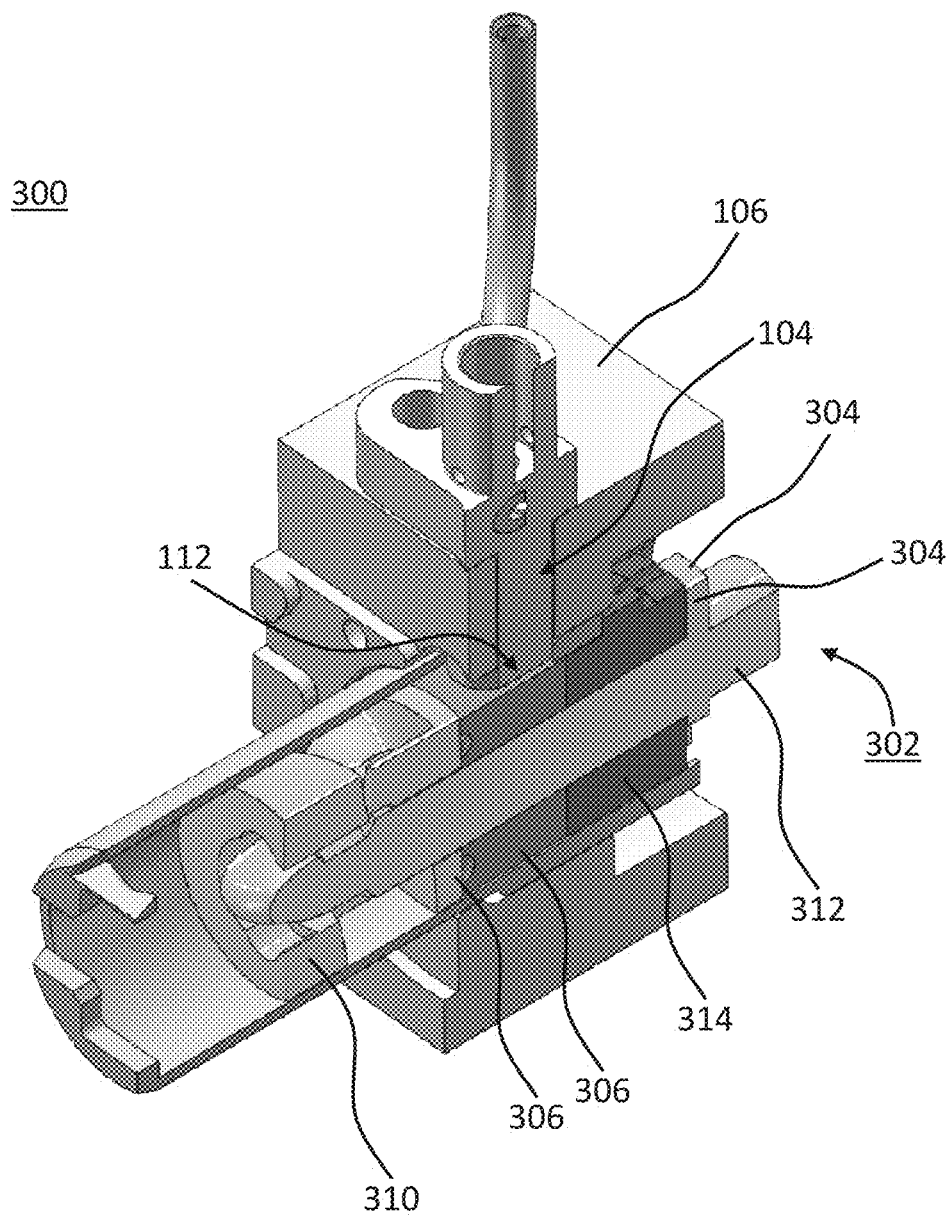


FIG. 3

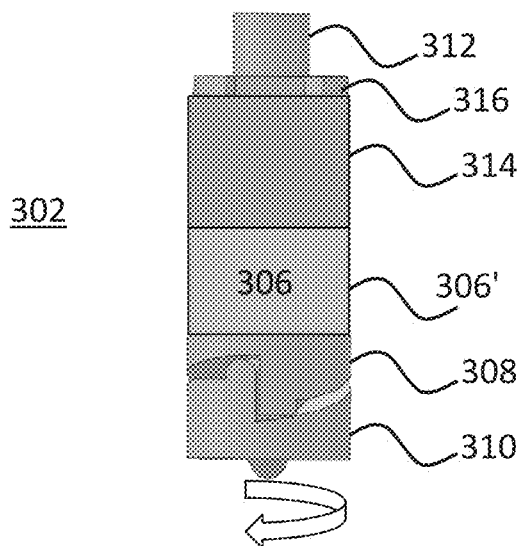


FIG. 4A

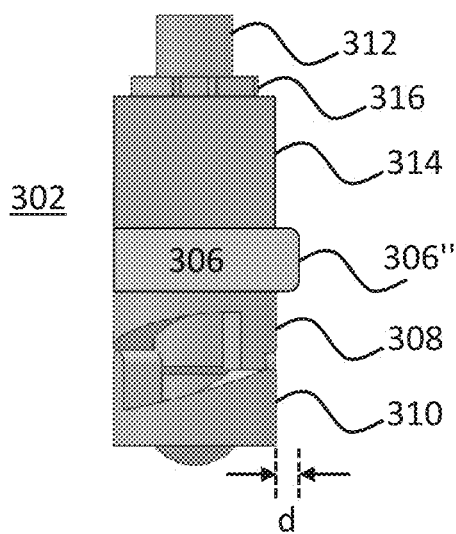


FIG. 4B

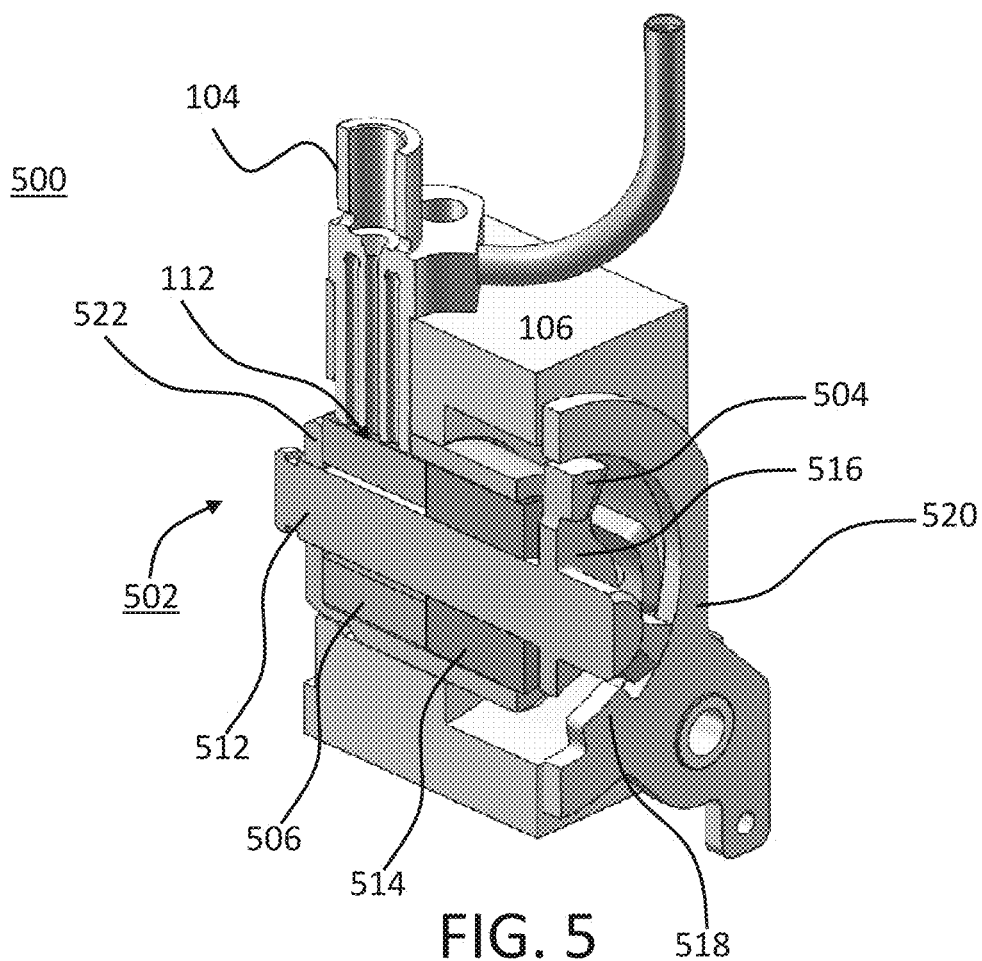


FIG. 5

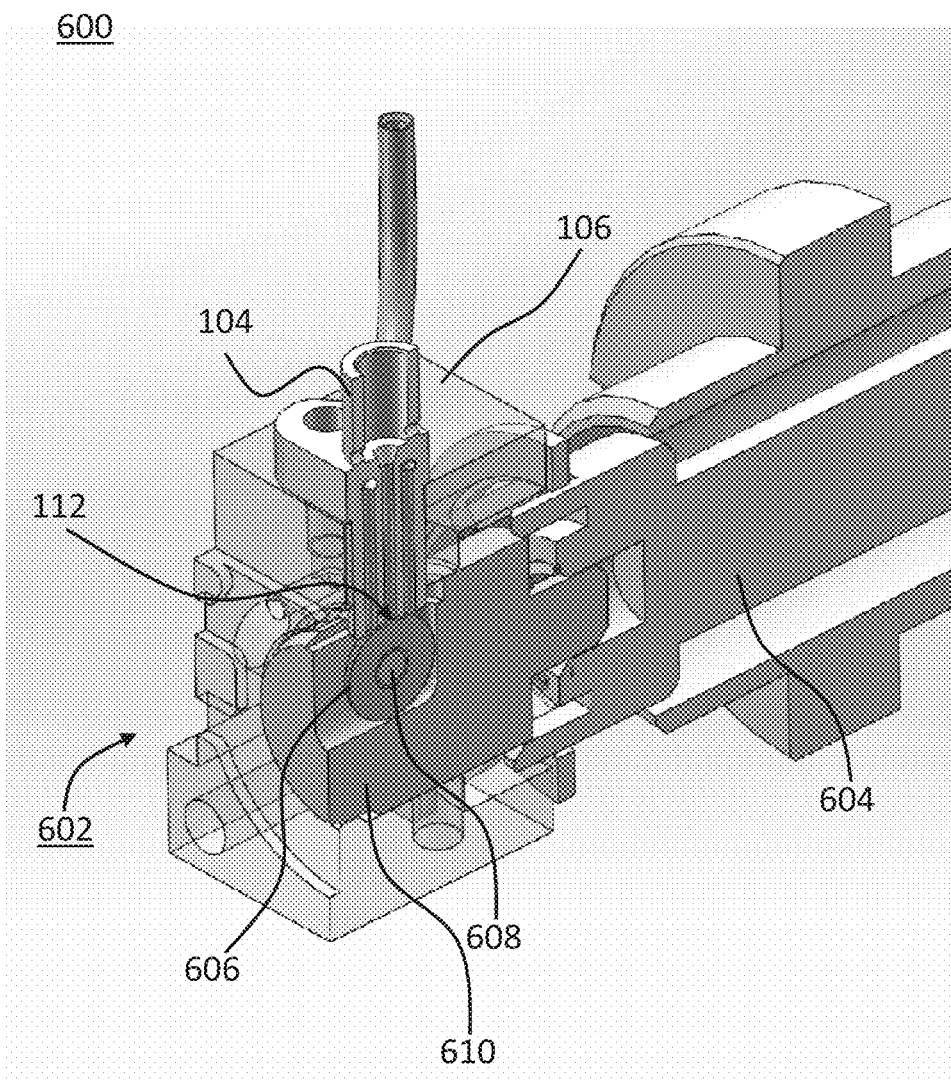


FIG. 6

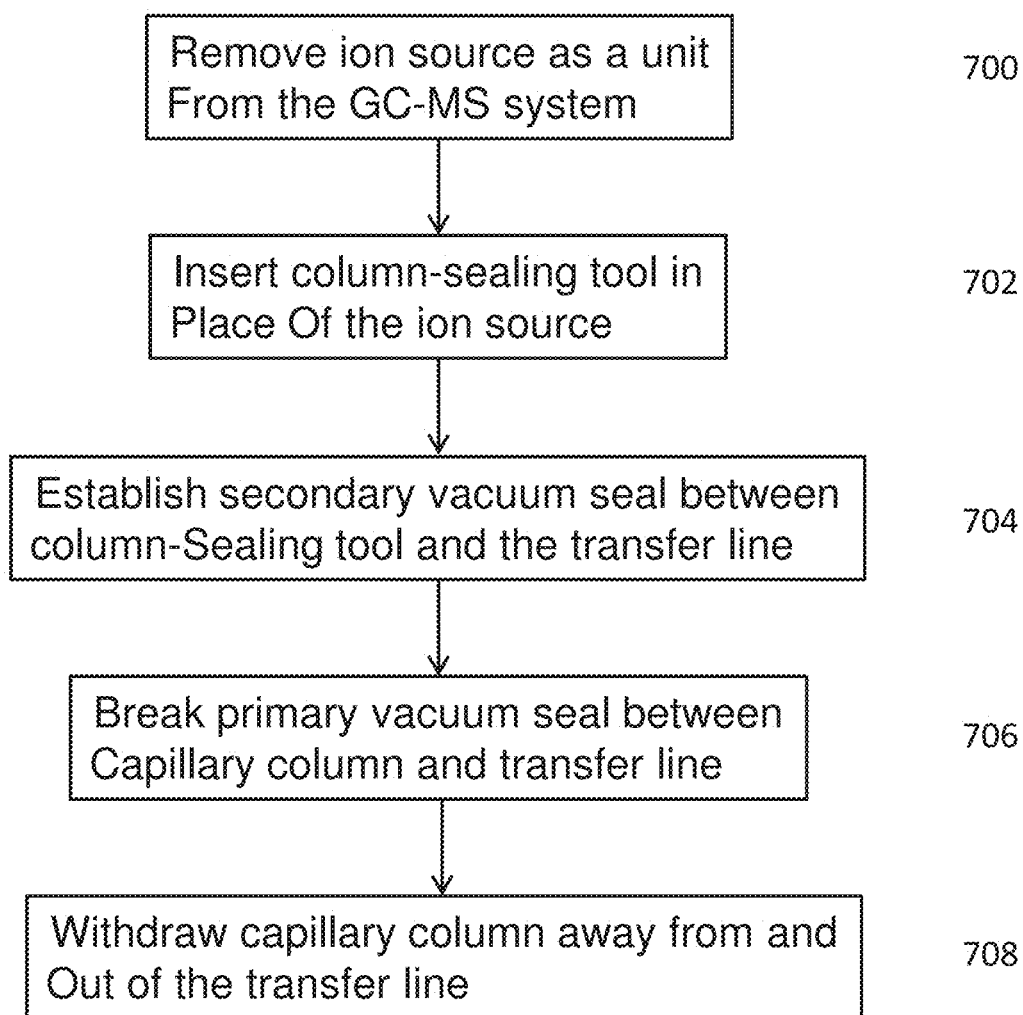


FIG. 7

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR DECOUPLING A CAPILLARY COLUMN FROM A GAS CHROMATOGRAPHY-MASS SPECTROMETRY (GC-MS) SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates generally to charged particle analyzers, and more particularly to a method and system for decoupling a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system without venting a high vacuum enclosure that at least partially contains the capillary column.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Column maintenance and/or replacement is a routine process in the field of mass spectrometry, typically requiring the operator to cool down the mass spectrometer and vent the high vacuum chamber to atmospheric pressure prior to decoupling the capillary column from the system. This process is time consuming, as the operator must wait for the system to cool, vent and then re-thermalize after startup before continuing productive work with the instrument. For instance, each time this process is performed on a quadrupole mass analyzer an estimated five hours of instrument time is lost. Further, this time is increased for some analytical instruments, which require ultra high vacuum pressure that can only be achieved with several hours of "bake out" at elevated temperature.

To avoid the above-noted disadvantages, many operators have installed "no vent" column changing systems. These systems typically require an additional restrictor to be installed in the column path, as well as a gas tank to protect against contamination during column maintenance. Unfortunately, the use of a "no vent" system prevents the operator from positioning the end of the capillary column immediately adjacent to the ionization source. As such, in addition to adding complexity, these "no vent" systems also have a tendency to introduce active sites in the column path, which results in reduced response to injected sample and poor linearity in calibration curves.

An alternative, albeit more risky, method of replacing the capillary column in GC-MS systems requires the operator to remove the current column and expose the vacuum chamber to a high flow of ambient air while quickly installing the new column. In addition to placing strain on the pumping system and causing oxidation of heated components, this method also risks introducing ferrule particulates and dust into the ion source and lens assembly as well as causing damage to the columns. The success of this method is strongly dependent on operator skill, experience and agility.

Another difficulty that is encountered during routine column maintenance is ensuring that the outlet end of the capillary column is positioned properly, every time the column is replaced. Proper positioning of the column requires a high level of operator skill as well as the use of specialized tools. Failure to properly position the column when it is reattached may affect the reproducibility and reliability of analytical results that are obtained using the GC-MS system.

It would be beneficial to provide a method and system that overcomes at least some of the above-mentioned limitations and drawbacks of the prior art.

SUMMARY OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with an aspect of at least one embodiment of the invention, there is provided a method for decoupling

a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (CG-MS) system, comprising: removing as a unit from the GC-MS system an ion source that is disposed, prior to removal, between a high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system; inserting in place of the ion source a column-sealing tool having a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position, the sealing element being maintained in the non-sealing position during inserting; actuating the sealing element from the non-sealing position to the sealing position to form a secondary vacuum seal with the high vacuum end of the transfer line; subsequent to establishing the secondary vacuum seal, breaking a primary vacuum seal between the capillary column and an end of the transfer line that is opposite the high vacuum end; and withdrawing the capillary column away from and out of the transfer line.

After breaking the primary vacuum seal a gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 100 ml/minute.

In certain implementations the gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 50 ml/minute.

In certain implementations the gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 10 ml/minute.

In accordance with an aspect of at least one embodiment of the invention, there is provided a system for decoupling a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (CG-MS) system, comprising: a transfer line having a first end that is disposed within a high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system and that is aligned with a removable ion source sub-assembly of the GC-MS system, and having a second end that is opposite the first end, the second end being sized to receive an outlet end of a capillary column; a primary vacuum seal element for forming a primary vacuum seal between the capillary column and the second end of the transfer line, the outlet end of the capillary column being positioned within the high vacuum enclosure and in fluid communication with the removable ion source when the primary vacuum seal is formed; and a column-sealing tool configured to be inserted into the GC-MS system, subsequent to removal of the removable ion source sub-assembly, at a location between the first end of the transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system, the column-sealing tool comprising a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position; and an actuator for selectively actuating the sealing element between the non-sealing position and the sealing position, wherein the sealing element forms a secondary vacuum seal with the first end of the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system and when the sealing element is in the sealing position.

In accordance with an aspect of at least one embodiment of the invention, there is provided a column-sealing tool for use during decoupling of a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (CG-MS) system, the column-sealing tool comprising: an engagement structure for removably securing the column-sealing tool within a high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system and at a location between a high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system; and a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position; wherein the sealing element forms a secondary vacuum seal with the first end of the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system and when the sealing element is in the sealing position.

In accordance with an aspect of at least one embodiment of the invention, there is provided a column-sealing tool for

use during decoupling of a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system, the column-sealing tool comprising; an engagement structure for removably securing the column-sealing tool within a high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system and at a location between a high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system; and a wheel-shaped sealing element rotatably mounted to a body of the column-sealing tool via an axle structure; wherein the sealing element is disposed for forming a secondary vacuum seal with the first end of the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system and when the sealing element is in the sealing position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The instant invention will now be described by way of example only, and with reference to the attached drawings, wherein similar reference numerals denote similar elements throughout the several views, and in which:

FIG. 1A is a simplified diagram showing a general assembled GC-MS system with a removable ion source disposed adjacent to a transfer line.

FIG. 1B is a simplified diagram showing the system of FIG. 1A with the removable ion source removed.

FIG. 1C is a simplified diagram showing the system of FIG. 1A prior to inserting a column-sealing tool.

FIG. 1D is a simplified diagram showing the system of FIG. 1A with the column-sealing tool disposed adjacent to the outlet end of the transfer line, but prior to forming a seal between a sealing element of the column-sealing tool and the transfer line.

FIG. 1E is a simplified diagram showing the system of FIG. 1A after the sealing element of the column-sealing tool is actuated into a sealing position.

FIG. 2A is a simplified side view showing a column-sealing tool according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 2B is a simplified end view showing the column-sealing tool of FIG. 2A disposed adjacent to a transfer line, and prior to forming a seal between the sealing element and the transfer line.

FIG. 2C is a simplified end view showing the column-sealing tool of FIG. 2A disposed adjacent to a transfer line, and subsequent to forming a seal between the sealing element and the transfer line.

FIG. 3 is a perspective sectional view showing another column-sealing tool according to an embodiment of the invention, disposed adjacent to a transfer line.

FIG. 4A is a simplified diagram showing the column-sealing tool of FIG. 3 in a non-sealing condition.

FIG. 4B is a simplified diagram showing the column-sealing tool of FIG. 3 in a sealing condition.

FIG. 5 is a perspective sectional view showing another column-sealing tool according to an embodiment of the invention, disposed adjacent to a transfer line.

FIG. 6 is a perspective sectional view showing yet another column-sealing tool according to an embodiment of the invention, disposed adjacent to a transfer line.

FIG. 7 is a simplified flow diagram for a method according to an embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

The following description is presented to enable a person skilled in the art to make and use the invention, and is provided in the context of a particular application and its

requirements. Various modifications to the disclosed embodiments will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art, and the general principles defined herein may be applied to other embodiments and applications without departing from the scope of the invention. Thus, the present invention is not intended to be limited to the embodiments disclosed, but is to be accorded the widest scope consistent with the principles and features disclosed herein.

In the description of the invention herein, it is understood that a word appearing in the singular encompasses its plural counterpart, and a word appearing in the plural encompasses its singular counterpart, unless implicitly or explicitly understood or stated otherwise. Furthermore, it is understood that for any given component or embodiment described herein, any of the possible candidates or alternatives listed for that component may generally be used individually or in combination with one another, unless implicitly or explicitly understood or stated otherwise. Additionally, it will be understood that any list of such candidates or alternatives is merely illustrative, not limiting, unless implicitly or explicitly understood or stated otherwise.

Moreover, unless otherwise indicated, numbers expressing quantities of ingredients, constituents, reaction conditions and so forth used in the specification and claims are to be understood as being modified by the term "about." Accordingly, unless indicated to the contrary, the numerical parameters set forth in the specification and attached claims are approximations that may vary depending upon the desired properties sought to be obtained by the subject matter presented herein. At the very least, and not as an attempt to limit the application of the doctrine of equivalents to the scope of the claims, each numerical parameter should at least be construed in light of the number of reported significant digits and by applying ordinary rounding techniques. Notwithstanding that the numerical ranges and parameters setting forth the broad scope of the subject matter presented herein are approximations, the numerical values set forth in the specific examples are reported as precisely as possible. Any numerical values, however, inherently contain certain errors necessarily resulting from the standard deviation found in their respective testing measurements.

Certain markets that use mass spectrometers are focused on running as many samples through the instrument as possible. The time required to vent, disassemble, clean, reassemble, and then pump down the system back to operating pressures is costly and time inefficient. However, a significant amount of time/cost savings can be obtained in the operation if the venting and pump down aspects of maintenance can be removed from the equation. The drawings and related text disclose methods, systems and apparatus that address such a market need. In a convenient manner, a secondary vacuum seal is established prior to breaking the primary vacuum seal in a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system, such as for instance during routine column maintenance or column replacement. The said methods, systems and apparatus allow the operator to decouple the capillary column from the GC-MS system for maintenance and/or replacement without having to vent and/or cool the instrument.

Referring now to FIG. 1A, shown a simplified diagram of a general assembled GC-MS system **100** with a removable ion source **102**, which is disposed adjacent to a transfer line **104**. By way of a specific and non-limiting example, the removable ion source **102** is configured in accordance with the teaching of U.S. Pat. No. 7,709,790, which issued on May 4, 2010, and the entire contents of which are incorpo-

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rated herein by reference. The removable ion source **102** and other components of the system **100**, which include but are not limited to a heater block **106**, an ion guide **108** and an analyzer **110**, as well as the outlet (high vacuum) end **112** of the transfer line **104**, are contained within a common or segmented vacuum enclosure **114**. An end section of a capillary column **116** extends through the transfer line **104**, all the way to the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104** within the vacuum enclosure **114**. A ferrule **118**, or another suitable element, forms a primary vacuum seal between the capillary column **116** and the transfer line **104**. In this way, sample that is injected onto the capillary column **116** can be introduced into the vacuum enclosure **114**, where it is ionized using the ion source **102** prior to being transported through the ion guide **108** to the analyzer **110**.

It is to be appreciated that the single analyzer **110**, as shown in FIG. 1A, can include a variety of single stage analyzer systems capable of mass spectrometry, such as, for example, a time-of-flight (TOF) device, a linear ion trap (LIT), magnetic and electrostatic analyzers, a quadrupole, an ion cyclotron resonance (ICR) instrument, an orbitrap, or a Fourier Transform Mass Spectrometer (FTMS). Moreover, the embodiments of the present invention can also be utilized in a tandem mass spectrometer with more than one analyzer (known as tandem in space), as known to those of ordinary skill in the art. For example, one mass analyzer can isolate one precursor from many precursors entering a mass analyzer, after which the isolated precursor is collided with a gas within a collision cell causing fragmentation of the isolated precursor. A second mass analyzer then can catalog the fragments produced from the fragmented isolated precursor.

As is shown in FIG. 1B, the ion source **102** is removable from the GC-MS system **100** as a unit. In particular, an insertion/retraction (I/R) tool (not illustrated) is used to engage a locking feature (or engagement structure) at end of the ion source **102**, and subsequently retract the ion source **102** out of the system **100** along the direction of the block arrow in the drawing. A valve system is used to avoid the need to vent the vacuum enclosure **114** during insertion of the tool and removal of the ion source **102**. As is shown in FIG. 1B, removal of the ion source **102** from the system **100** leaves a void immediately adjacent to the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104**. The primary vacuum seal is maintained between the column **116** and the transfer line **104**, using the ferrule **118**, such that ambient atmosphere cannot pass through the transfer line **104** and enter the vacuum enclosure **114**.

Referring now to FIG. 1C, shown is the system **100** and a column-sealing tool **120**. The column-sealing tool **120** is configured to fit into the void immediately adjacent to the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104**, when the ion source **102** is removed. Column-sealing tool **120** has a sealing element **122** that is arranged on the column-sealing tool **120** such that the sealing element **122** is opposite the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104** when the column-sealing tool **120** is fully inserted into the void. In particular, FIG. 1C depicts the sealing element **122** in a non-sealing position during insertion of the column-sealing tool **120** into the void along the direction of the block arrow. A tool, such as for instance the same I/R tool that is used to remove the ion source **102**, is used to engage locking features at one end of the column-sealing tool **120** and insert the column-sealing tool **120** through the not illustrated valve system and into the void. Once in the fully inserted position, as is shown in FIG. 1D, the sealing element **122** is actuated into a sealing position. For instance, at least a portion of the sealing element **122** is

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actuated along the direction of the block arrow in the diagram and toward the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104**. Optionally, a linear actuator or a rotational actuator serves to actuate the at least a portion of the sealing element **122** into the sealing position.

Referring now to FIG. 1E, shown is the column-sealing tool **120** fully inserted into the void immediately adjacent to the transfer line **104**, and with the sealing element **122** in the sealing position. The sealing element forms a secondary vacuum seal against the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104**. It is not essential to form a secondary vacuum seal that is of the same quality as the primary vacuum seal. In particular, relatively small leaks can be tolerated for a short period of time without placing undue stress on the pumping system. Of course, the maximum gas flow rate that can be tolerated through the secondary vacuum seal depends upon, inter alia, how long it takes the operator to replace the column and re-establish the primary vacuum seal. By way of a specific and non-limiting example, the secondary vacuum seal limits the flow of gas into the vacuum enclosure **114** to less than 100 ml/minute. In certain implementations the secondary vacuum seal limits the flow of gas into the vacuum enclosure **114** to less than 50 ml/minute. In certain implementations the secondary vacuum seal limits the flow of gas into the vacuum enclosure **114** to less than 10 ml/minute. It is to be understood however, that different gases may impose different demands on the quality of the secondary vacuum seal.

Of course, FIGS. 1A-E depict the steps that are performed during decoupling of the capillary column **116** from the GC-MS system **100**, without venting or cooling the instrument. In order to replace the column **116** after routine maintenance, or in order to couple a different capillary column to the GC-MS system **100**, substantially the same steps are performed in the reverse order. Briefly, one end of the capillary column **116** is inserted into the end of the transfer line **104** that is external to the vacuum enclosure **114** and opposite the outlet end **112**. The capillary column **116** is advanced through the transfer line **104** until it makes contact with the sealing element **122** of the column-sealing tool **120**. Advantageously, the sealing element **122** acts as a "stop" for the column and ensures accurate and precise positioning of the capillary column **116** without the need to use specialized tools or provide extensive operator training. Once the column is in the correct position, the ferrule **118** is tightened and the primary vacuum seal is re-established. The sealing element **122** is then actuated to the non-sealing position, thereby breaking the secondary vacuum seal and permitting the column-sealing tool to be removed from the GC-MS system via the valve system. Finally, the ion source **102** is inserted into the GC-MS system via the valve system, and productive operation of the GC-MS system may resume.

Referring now to FIGS. 2A-C, shown are selected features of a column-sealing tool **200** according to an embodiment of the invention. FIG. 2A is a side view showing the general shape of the column-sealing tool **200**, which is configured to fit into the void immediately adjacent to the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104** of system **100**. The column-sealing tool **200** includes an optional alignment key **202**, which is used to ensure correct alignment with the transfer line **104** when the tool **200** is inserted into the system **100**. Locking features **204** (or engagement structure) are provided at one end of the column-sealing tool **200**, for engaging complementary features of a not-illustrated I/R tool, which is used for inserting and retracting the column-sealing tool **200**. Also shown in FIG. 2A is a sealing element **206**, which is fabricated from a malleable, high temperature

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material. By way of a few specific and non-limiting examples, the sealing element **206** is fabricated from one of silicone rubber, a fluorinated elastomer, and a polyimide.

The sealing element **206** is actuatable between a non-sealing position (as shown in FIG. 2B) and a sealing position (as shown in FIG. 2C). The column-sealing tool includes an actuator, in this specific example a rotational actuator **208**, for actuating the sealing element **206** between the non-sealing and sealing positions. In particular, rotating the actuator **208** causes the sealing element **206** to deform and thereby forces a portion of the sealing element **206** to move radially outward and into engagement with the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104**. As shown in FIGS. 2B and 2C, the ferrule **118** may be removed after the sealing element **206** engages the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104** to form a secondary vacuum seal, and the capillary column **116** may then be decoupled from the system without venting the common vacuum enclosure **114**.

FIG. 3 is a perspective sectional view showing a system **300** including a column-sealing tool **302**, according to an embodiment of the invention. The general shape of the column-sealing tool **302** is configured to fit into the void immediately adjacent to the outlet (high vacuum) end **112** of the transfer line **104** of a GC-MS system. The column-sealing tool optionally includes an alignment key (not shown), which is used to ensure correct alignment with the transfer line **104** when the tool **302** is inserted into the system **300**. Locking features **304** (or engagement structure) are provided at one end of the column-sealing tool **302**, for engaging complementary features of a not-illustrated I/R tool, which is used for inserting and retracting the column-sealing tool **302**. Also shown in FIG. 3 is a sealing element **306**, which is fabricated from a malleable, high temperature material. By way of a few specific and non-limiting examples, the sealing element **306** is fabricated from one of silicone rubber, a fluorinated elastomer, and a polyimide.

Referring also to FIGS. 4A and 4B, the sealing element **306** is actuatable between a non-sealing position **306'** (as shown in FIG. 4A) and a sealing position **306''** (as shown in FIG. 4B). More particularly, the column-sealing tool **302** includes an actuator, which in this specific example is an internal cam-based actuator comprising a stationary cam **308** and a moving cam **310**. The sealing element **306**, the stationary cam **308** and the moving cam **310** are mounted on a common shaft **312**, along with a guide member **314** and a retaining plate **316**. When the moving cam **310** is rotated relative to the stationary cam **308**, a spacing therebetween is increased and the sealing element **306** is compressed between the adjacent surfaces of the stationary cam **308** and guide member **314**. The guide element **514** is fabricated from a suitable material, such as for instance Vespel SCP 5000. In general, the materials that are used to fabricate the various parts of the column-sealing tool **302** should be able to withstand temperatures greater than 350° C.

During compression, the sealing element swells or bulges along at least one direction, thereby being actuated between the non-sealing position **306'** and the sealing position **306''**. In FIG. 4 the sealing element **306** bulges a distance "d," which is not drawn to scale, but rather it is exaggerated in order to provide a better understanding of the operating principle. In practice, the column-sealing tool **302** is sized-similarly to the void that is created in the heating block **106** when the ion source **102** is removed. The sealing element bulges sufficiently to form the secondary vacuum seal against the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104**. As discussed previously with reference to FIGS. 2B and 2C, the ferrule **118** may be removed after the sealing element **206** engages

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the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104** to form the secondary vacuum seal, and the capillary column **116** may then be decoupled from the system without venting the common vacuum enclosure **114**.

FIG. 5 is a perspective sectional view showing a system **500** including a column-sealing tool **502**, according to an embodiment of the invention. It is to be understood that the column-sealing tool **502** and the column-sealing tool **302** rely on similar operating principles. In particular, both column-sealing tools **302** and **502** act to compress a sealing element **306** and **506**, respectively, in a longitudinal direction along the length of a shaft **312** and **512**, respectively. Compression of the sealing element **306** and **506** in the longitudinal direction results in a "bulging-out" of the sealing element **306** and **506** in a direction that is perpendicular to the longitudinal direction. More particularly, the sealing element **306** and **506** bulge outwardly toward the outlet end **112** of the transfer line **104** and form a secondary vacuum seal therewith.

Referring still to FIG. 5, the general shape of the column-sealing tool **502** is configured to fit into the void immediately adjacent to the outlet (high vacuum) end **112** of the transfer line **104** of a GC-MS system. The column-sealing tool **502** optionally includes an alignment key (not shown), which is used to ensure correct alignment with the transfer line **104** when the tool **502** is inserted into the system **500**. Locking features **504** (or engagement structure) are provided at one end of the column-sealing tool **502**. In particular, the locking features **504** include ramped-tab structures disposed along the periphery of a retaining plate **516**. The locking features **504** are arranged to engage complementary ramped-tab structures **518** of a plate **520** configured with the heating block **106**.

During use, a not-illustrated I/R tool is used to insert the column-sealing tool **502** into the position that is shown in FIG. 5. An operator inserts the column-sealing tool **502** into the void that is created when the removable ion source **102** is removed, with the application of sufficient pressure to partially compress the sealing element **506** between surfaces of end plate **522** and guide element **514**. The sealing element **506** is fabricated from a malleable, high temperature material. By way of a few specific and non-limiting examples, the sealing element **506** is fabricated from one of silicone rubber, a fluorinated elastomer, and a polyimide. The guide element **514** is fabricated from a suitable material, such as for instance Vespel SCP 5000. In general, the materials that are used to fabricate the various parts of the column-sealing tool **502** should be able to withstand temperatures greater than 350° C.

The operator subsequently twists the I/R tool, forcing the ramped-tab locking features **504** of the column-sealing tool **502** to be driven below the complementary ramped-tab features **518**, and thereby further compressing the sealing element **506** and causing the sealing element **506** to bulge toward the outlet end **112** of transfer line **104** and form a secondary vacuum seal therewith. Such a ramped-tab design enables the entire column-sealing tool **502**, as shown in FIG. 5, to be easily and quickly coupled to and decoupled from the heater block assembly **106** using the I/R tool.

FIG. 6 is a perspective sectional view showing a system **600** including a column-sealing tool **602**, according to an embodiment of the invention. The general shape of the column-sealing tool **602** is configured to fit into the void immediately adjacent to the outlet (high vacuum) end **112** of the transfer line **104** of a GC-MS system. The column-sealing tool **602** optionally includes an alignment key (not shown), which is used to ensure correct alignment with the

transfer line 104 when the tool 602 is inserted into the system 600. During use, an I/R tool (604) is used to insert the column-sealing tool 602 into the position that is shown in FIG. 6. More particularly, an operator inserts the column-sealing tool 602 into the void that is created when the removable ion source 102 is removed, with the application of sufficient pressure to cause the wheel-shaped the sealing element 606 to roll over the outlet end 112 of the transfer line 104. The sealing element 606 is fabricated from a malleable, high temperature material and is shaped such that it becomes compressed between the outlet end 112 of the transfer line and a shoulder screw 608, which rotatably mounts the sealing element 606 to a body 610 of the column-sealing tool 602, when the column-sealing tool 602 is fully inserted. The shoulder screw 608 also acts as an axle about which the wheel-shaped sealing element 606 rotates as the column-sealing tool 602 is being inserted. One end of the body 610 of the column-sealing tool 602 includes an engagement structure (not shown). The engagement structure is for removably securing the column-sealing tool 602 within the high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system, at a location between the high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system. By way of a few specific and non-limiting examples, the sealing element 606 is fabricated from one of silicone rubber, a fluorinated elastomer, and a polyimide. In general, the materials that are used to fabricate the various parts of the column-sealing tool 602 should be able to withstand temperatures greater than 350° C.

Referring now to FIG. 7, shown is a simplified flow diagram of a method for decoupling a capillary column from a GC-MS system, according to an embodiment of the invention. At 700 a removable ion source is removed as a unit from the GC-MS system. The ion source being disposed, prior to removal, between a high vacuum end of a transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system. By way of an example, an I/R tool is used to engage one end of the removable ion source and to subsequently withdraw the removable ion source out of the GC-MS system via a valve system so as to avoid the need to vent a common vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system. At 702 a column-sealing tool is inserted in place of the ion source. The column-sealing tool having a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position, and the sealing element being maintained in the non-sealing position during inserting of the column-sealing tool. At 704 the sealing element is actuated from the non-sealing position to the sealing position to form a secondary vacuum seal with the high vacuum or outlet end of the transfer line. At 706, subsequent to establishing the secondary vacuum seal, a primary vacuum seal between the capillary column and an end of the transfer line that is opposite the high vacuum end is broken. For instance, a ferrule that is used to form a seal between the transfer line and the capillary column is loosened and the transfer line is opened to ambient atmospheric pressure. Finally, at 708 the capillary column is withdrawn away from and out of the transfer line. After breaking the primary vacuum seal and removing the column from the transfer line a gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 100 ml/minute. In certain implementations a gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 50 ml/minute. In certain implementations a gas flow rate through the secondary vacuum seal does not exceed 10 ml/minute. The maximum flow rate that can be tolerated through the secondary vacuum seal depends upon factors including the length of time that is required to perform maintenance on column, as well as the gases that are present in the ambient atmosphere, etc.

Of course, FIG. 7 depicts the steps that are performed during decoupling of a capillary column from a GC-MS system, without venting or cooling the instrument. In order to replace the column after routine maintenance, or in order to couple a different capillary column to the GC-MS system, substantially the same steps 700-708 are performed in the reverse order. Briefly, one end of the capillary column is inserted into the end of the transfer line that is opposite the outlet end. The capillary column is advanced through the transfer line until it makes contact with the sealing element of the column-sealing tool. Advantageously, the sealing element acts as a "stop" for the column and ensures accurate and precise positioning of the capillary column without the need to use specialized tools or provide extensive operator training. Once the column is in the correct position, the ferrule is tightened and the primary vacuum seal is re-established. The sealing element is then actuated to the non-sealing position, thereby breaking the secondary vacuum seal and permitting the column-sealing tool to be removed from the GC-MS system via the valve system. Finally, the ion source is inserted into the GC-MS system via the valve system, and productive operation of the GC-MS system may resume.

While the above description constitutes a plurality of embodiments of the present invention, it will be appreciated that the present invention is susceptible to further modification and change without departing from the fair meaning of the accompanying claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A system for decoupling a capillary column from a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system, comprising:

a transfer line having a first end that is disposed within a high vacuum enclosure of the GC-MS system and that is aligned with a removable ion source sub-assembly of the GC-MS system, and having a second end that is opposite the first end, the second end being sized to receive an outlet end of a capillary column;

a primary vacuum seal element for forming a primary vacuum seal between the capillary column and the second end of the transfer line, the outlet end of the capillary column being positioned within the high vacuum enclosure and in fluid communication with the removable ion source when the primary vacuum seal is formed; and

a column-sealing tool configured to be inserted into the GC-MS system, subsequent to removal of the removable ion source sub-assembly, at a location between the first end of the transfer line and a mass analyzer of the GC-MS system, the column-sealing tool comprising a sealing element that is actuatable between a non-sealing position and a sealing position; and

an actuator for selectably actuating the sealing element between the non-sealing position and the sealing position,

wherein the sealing element forms a secondary vacuum seal with the first end of the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system and when the sealing element is in the sealing position.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the sealing element is fabricated from a material selected from the group consisting of: silicone rubber, a fluorinated elastomer, and a polyimide.

3. The system of claim 1, wherein the actuator is a linear actuator comprising a cam mechanism, and wherein actuating the sealing element between the non-sealing position and the sealing position comprises compressing the sealing

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element along a longitudinal axis of the column-sealing tool such that the sealing element undergoes an elongation in a direction that is normal to the longitudinal axis.

4. The system of claim 3, wherein the cam mechanism comprises a stationary cam and a moving cam, the moving cam being rotatable relative to the stationary cam, and wherein rotating the moving cam changes a spacing between the stationary cam and the moving cam along the longitudinal direction.

5. The system of claim 4, wherein during use the sealing element is compressed between a surface of the stationary cam and a surface of a guide element.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein the actuator is a rotational actuator comprising a cam mechanism, and wherein actuating the sealing element between the non-sealing position and the sealing position comprises deflecting the sealing element outwardly along a radial direction.

7. The system of claim 1, wherein the actuator comprises first ramped-tab structures disposed at one end of the column-sealing tool and complementary second ramped-tab structures configured with a heating block of the GC-MS system, wherein the sealing element is mounted on a shaft of the column-sealing tool, and wherein the column-sealing

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tool is rotated during insertion to drive the first ramped-tab structures under the second ramped-tab structures such that the sealing element is compressed along a longitudinal direction parallel to the shaft and undergoes an elongation in a direction that is normal to the longitudinal direction.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein during use the sealing element is compressed between a surface of an end plate that is mounted on the shaft and a surface of a guide element that is also mounted on the shaft.

9. The system of claim 1, wherein the column-sealing tool comprises an alignment key for aligning the sealing element with the transfer line when the column-sealing tool is inserted into the GC-MS system.

10. The system of claim 1, wherein the actuator comprises an insertion/retraction tool and the sealing element comprises a wheel-shaped structure, and wherein selectably actuating the sealing element between the non-sealing position and the sealing position comprises advancing the insertion/retraction tool into the GC-MS system until the wheel-shaped structure sealingly engages the first end of the transfer line.

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